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The Impact of Divorce on a Young Adult’s Intimate Relationships

Roughly one and one-half million children experience parental divorce every year (Stolberg and Mullet 39). Divorce has become more of a commonality in recent years and the trend is steadily climbing. When most people think of divorce they often don’t realize the effects it places on the children later on in life; specifically in the child’s intimate relationships. There have been claims in this research that developing romantic relationships in young adulthood plays an important role in an individual’s life (Ming 338). Although some dispute that parental divorce doesn’t affect a child’s romantic relationships, and only those involved can affect the outcome, many studies show a connection between parental divorce and children of divorce failing to form and sustain relationships. There are various factors of parental divorce that impact young adults who were children of divorce and can be directly linked to causing fear of intimacy, trust and satisfaction issues in romantic relationships, and negative attitudes about marriage.

Stephanie Coontz, a professor of History and Family studies at The Evergreen State College found that divorce has been prevalent in society as far back as the ancient Roman Empire (7). During this day in age divorce was very different than what it is in modern society. Coontz states back then when a man wanted to divorce his wife all he had to do was sign a paper and the deal was done. Astonishingly, when a woman wanted to do the same she had to put in two years of service at a church to be granted divorce (Coontz 8). The way Coontz shows how divorce has evolved into its modern society term is interesting to say the least. The origin and acceptance of modern divorce began in 17th century Western Europe and America, and statistically around 6% of marriages ended in divorce in this era. It wasn’t until the 1970s before there seemed to be a major increase of marriages ending in divorce. Today 50% of marriages end in divorce (Coontz 9). This left a lingering question with this steadily climbing rate of divorce, what kind of detrimental effects does it place on the family? Since this topic is fairly new in the world of divorce, there is relatively little background information and few studies on the long term effects placed on a child that experiences parental divorce. However, with divorce today being an intense topic, more investigations and case studies are being put into effect by researchers such as Coontz every day to contribute additional information on the issue.

When children are exposed to divorce, a number of changes often emerge that will affect them for the rest of their lives. The manner in which parents divorce directly impacts how the involved child adjusts. The fear of being intimate is a psychosomatic defense formed in childhood and acts as a barrier to closeness in adulthood. The psychosomatic effects of divorce are persistent in children from divorced families. According to the preceding theory, parental divorce where high conflict is involved results in “poor child adjustment” which leads to fear of intimacy when the child becomes a young adult (Fagan and Churchill160). Along with high conflict co-parenting due to divorce, there are also a few cases where the parental divorce diminished the high conflict co-parenting and resulted in positive and supportive co-parenting where the child coped more positively (Fagan and Churchill 156). Even though divorce does not always involve negative co-parenting, a shocking 81% of divorces have some form of conflict during the process (Fagan and Churchill 82).

Having experienced their parent’s relationship fall under, adolescents find it hard to become intimate and think that finding a secure relationship is unattainable (Stolberg 41). Fearful people lack a sense of appeal and are avoidant towards others due to an expectancy of rejection. Fear of intimacy caused by parental divorce is experienced by male and females in different manners. A study orchestrated by Allison Kirk, a doctoral student at UCLA, found that fear of intimacy specifically among women is a strong indicator of the longevity and likelihood of survival of a couple’s relationship in young adulthood. In comparison, men are more likely to exhibit distancing behaviors and are less likely to engage in emotional intimacy (Kirk 61). These statistics show that parental divorce is large enough factor in a child’s life to argue that it is a dilemma that cannot be ignored.

For those that believe parental divorce has no long-term consequence on a child’s life many high-regarded researchers show hard facts that counter this statement. Trust and satisfaction is such a major role in any relationship. When parental divorce is active in a child’s life it often leads to low trust in the child, and later on in life when they start casually dating is when “the strongest effects of parental divorced are exhibited”(Ottoway 42). When this lack of trust from experiencing divorce as a child is carried on into adulthood it shows that they fear rejection and their deficiency of trust often obstructs a deepening in their relationship (Fagan and Churchill 20). According to a study done by Amber J. Ottaway, a psychologist at Marquette University, the ramifications of parental divorce are already set in place even before they start their own intimate relationships. Ottoway goes on to state that it sabotages young adult’s relationship experiences and this association is more evident for women than men (44). Also studies showed that individuals of divorced parents are far more likely to believe that relationships are “beset by infidelity and absence of trust and should be approached with caution” (Ottoway 45).With this being said, it is clear that parental divorce effects the child’s intimate relationships in young adulthood different than children whose parents remained married.

With aspects such as the fear of intimacy and diminished trust and satisfaction in a relationship, parental divorce also can be connected to the child’s negative attitudes toward divorce and marriage. Some of these attitudinal discrepancies are noticeable as early as kindergarten. Statistics confirm that compared to children of intact families, children of divorce have more positive attitudes towards divorce and less sympathetic attitudes towards marriage (Fagan and Churchill 21). This leads to diminished loyalty and lower quality in their intimate relationships. Both male and female children of divorce show more insecurity in a relationship. Having viewed their parent’s conflicts with divorce many children fear that their own marriage will be deficient in love, trust, and communication. This makes them believe they will be plagued by betrayal, divergence, or be neglected and are more likely to divorce and less likely to get married because of this fear (Fagan and Churchill 22).

An objection to this argument is that effects of divorce in children are only prominent around the time of divorce. In a study of children of parental divorce Fagan and Churchill disagree and state in their study they found that the children still had prominent anxiety about their chances of having a satisfying marriage even a decade after the divorce (22). This anxiety and negative attitude about marriage hindered with the child’s ability to marry well. Some were unable to form satisfying relationships, while others rushed on impulse into relationships (Fagan and Churchill 23).

It is clear through case studies and research that one generation is capable of passing its marital insecurity onto the next. Young adults who experienced their own parents’ divorce have a 38% higher chance of divorce than with children of intact families, and are “39% more likely to marry other children of divorce” (Fagan and Churchill 23). A couple with one partner from a divorced home is almost twice as likely to divorce compared to relationships where neither partner came from divorce. An even more detrimental statistic is when both partners come from divorced homes they are three times more likely to divorce(Fagan and Churchill 24). This is a significant increase is a direct link to the cause of negative thoughts towards marriage.

“Only acts of war and the events of natural disasters are more harmful to a child’s psyche than the divorce process” (Nielsen 453). Parental divorce will never stop being an issue and is continuously growing. People need come to the realization that this is starting to become an ongoing problem in modern society, and that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In other words, the ramifications of today will affect those of tomorrow. For people to argue that parental divorce does not have any effect on a child’s intimate relationships as a young adult are blatantly ignorant of all the evidence showing results otherwise. Statistically, all the data collected on the subject shows the odds are against children of parental divorce who seek a happy relationship and long marriage. For people who disagree that parental divorce doesn’t affect the child’s relationships, the three major claims of fear of intimacy, trust issues, and doubts on marriage show differently. At this point, this topic is considered by researchers as a newer and ongoing topic when in the discussion of children and divorce. Even though this is true, with the “little” research that has been done there is already so much data and evidence to back their claim. As years pass more research will develop and more evidence will leave no doubt in the oppositions’ minds that parental divorce is in fact directly linked causing issues in the child’s intimate relationships.

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